

## WESTERN WHEATGRASS *Pascopyrum smithii* (Rydb.)

**A. Love**

plant symbol = PASM

Contributed by: USDA NRCS Plant Materials Program



Robert H. Mohlenbrock  
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### Alternate Names

*Agropyron smithii* Rydb.

### Uses

**Erosion control:** Western wheatgrass is an excellent erosion control plant because of its spreading rhizomes. It is widely used in seed mixtures for range seeding, revegetation of saline and alkaline areas, and in critical areas for erosion control in the central and northern Great Plains region. This grass protected watershed dams in Kansas from damage when they were overtopped during a 14-inch rainfall event.

**Reclamation:** Western wheatgrass is frequently used in the northern Great Plains for surface mine

revegetation. Because of its strong rhizomes and adaptation to a variety of soils, it performs well as part of a reclamation mixture.

**Livestock:** Forage quality is high for pasture or range seedings.

### Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

### Description

*Pascopyrum smithii* (Rydb.) A. Love, western wheatgrass, is perhaps one of the best known and most commonly used native grasses. It is a long-lived, cool season species that has coarse blue-green leaves with prominent veins. Because of this bluish appearance it has sometimes been called bluestem wheatgrass or bluejoint. It is a sod former with very strong, spreading rhizomes. Stems arise singly or in clusters of a few and reach heights of 1 to 3 feet. The sheaths are hairy and the purplish auricles typically clasp the stem. The seed spike is erect and about 2 to 6 inches long.

### Adaptation and Distribution

Western wheatgrass is adapted to fine and very fine soils and is replaced by thickspike wheatgrass on coarser soils. Although it is able to grow on a wide variety of soils it prefers the heavier but well drained soils. It requires moderate to high soil moisture content and is most common in the 10 to 14 inch annual precipitation zones. Above 20 inches per year it behaves as an increaser on rangelands, below 20 inches it is a decreaser. Its elevational range is 1,000 to 9,000 feet.

Western wheatgrass tolerates saline and saline-sodic soils, poor drainage and moderately severe drought. It will tolerate spring flooding, high water tables, and considerable silt deposition. It is very cold hardy and can grow in partial shade. It is grazing resistant and can survive fires if in the dormant stage; recovery from fire, however, is slow.

Western wheatgrass grows in association with many species, the more common being blue grama, buffalograss, needlegrasses, bluebunch wheatgrass, rough fescue, Idaho fescue, and prairie junegrass. It begins growth about 2 to 3 weeks before blue grama and does not mature until much later in the growing season.

Western wheatgrass performs poorly in the East and is not recommended for any use in the region.

Western wheatgrass is distributed throughout the west and midwest portions of the United States. For a current distribution map, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Website.

#### **Establishment**

Seed of western wheatgrass should be planted 1/2 to 1 inch deep in fine to medium soil. Seeding rates should be 5 to 15 pounds PLS per acre drilled or 20 to 25 PLS per row foot. If seed is broadcast or used on harsh sites, the rate should be doubled. This species should be seeded in early spring, late fall or in the period of late summer, early fall. It can be sodded.

Seedling vigor is fair and stands may be slow to establish. It has stronger rooting abilities than does thickspike wheatgrass but spreads more slowly and may take several years to become firmly established. Once established, it is very hardy and enduring. It is moderately compatible with other species and is moderately aggressive.

#### **Management**

Western wheatgrass greens up in March or early April and matures in August. If moisture is adequate, it will make fair summer or fall regrowth. If nitrogen is applied it will compete with warm season grasses.

Western wheatgrass is moderately palatable to elk and cattle all year although this quality diminishes in late summer. It is palatable to deer only in spring. It is preferred by cattle more than by sheep. It can be grazed if 50 to 60 percent of the annual growth is allowed to remain (3 or 4 inch stubble). Rest rotation of western wheatgrass is advised. In areas where it is dense, it makes an excellent hay as well as pasture.

Irrigation will improve western wheatgrass stands and aid establishment. Weed control and fertilization will also help. Pitting, chiseling, disking, and interseeding can be used to stimulate stands of western wheatgrass.

#### **Pests and Potential Problems**

The primary pests to western wheatgrass are grasshoppers, ergot, and stem and leaf rusts.

#### **Cultivars, Improved, and Selected Materials (and area of origin)**

‘Ariba’ western wheatgrass was released for dry land hay production, grazing, and conservation seedings in the western part of the Central Plains and in the southwestern United States. ‘Flintlock’ is a broad-based cultivar. It is recommended for conservation seeding, dry land hay production, and grazing in the Central Plains. ‘Barton’ is a strongly rhizomatous, leafy ecotype, intermediate in growth between northern and southern types. ‘Barton’ is relatively disease free and high in forage and seed production. ‘Rosana’ is a northern type western wheatgrass. Plants are blue-green, leafy, with moderately fine stems. Rhizomes produce a tight sod. ‘Rosana’ is recommended for reseeding depleted range lands and the reclamation of disturbed lands in the Northern Great Plains. ‘Rodan’ northern type western wheatgrass is moderately rhizomatous and forms a dense blue-green sward. Leaves are thinner and less heavily veined than other western wheatgrasses. Western wheatgrass seed is available at most farm seed stores.

#### **Prepared By & Species Coordinator:**

USDA NRCS Plant Materials Program

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For more information about this and other plants, please contact your local NRCS field office or Conservation District, and visit the PLANTS <<http://plants.usda.gov>> and Plant Materials Program Web sites <<http://Plant-Materials.nrcs.usda.gov>>.

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